

New Entrants to Farming So Ewe Want to Keep Sheep? – New Entrants Guide to Keeping Sheep



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Want to start your own sheep flock? Be this flock of ten or one thousand ewes, the same basic concepts will apply. There are several factors such as record keeping, obtaining land, and sourcing livestock which must all be taken into consideration to help establish a successful and profitable sheep enterprise.

Sourcing Land

Sourcing good quality grazing at affordable prices can be a challenge for many new sheep keepers. The majority of land is already owned or rented by farmers with established businesses who are in a position to offer larger sums to acquire additional ground. This can make it difficult for new sheep keepers to get a start. It is worth talking to both estate and land agents who may have land available. Farming press may also contain adverts with ground available. Talking to other farmers or smallholders within your local area may also be beneficial in helping to find available land.

The Scottish Land Matching service was launched in 2019. This is a confidential service that allows both new entrants and land owners to explore options of tenancies and joint ventures opportunities. To register and see more information visit <https://www.nfus.org.uk/policy/joint-venture-hub.aspx>



Purchasing Livestock

The two main methods of purchasing livestock are through an auction market or privately from an established breeder. For more information on purchasing livestock for the first time, please see the following fact sheet <https://www.fas.scot/downloads/a-guide-to-buying-and-selling-at-the-mart/>.

When bringing any new livestock home to the farm, it is important to quarantine them for biosecurity purposes. This helps to protect both existing and new animals. On arrival new animals should be isolated for approximately four weeks (where possible). This isolation period provides an opportune window to dose/vaccinate your new animals to ensure they are healthy before being mixed with the rest of the flock. If you have any queries or concerns it is recommend you seek the advice of a local vet, who will be able to offer insight into the most suitable treatments and products to use.

These quarantine rules apply to both animals purchased privately or through an auction market.



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Breeds, Breeding and Flock Health

Breed Selection

The UK sheep industry is primarily stratified, with specific breeds inhabiting certain environments. This has occurred over a number of years, with breeds adapting to the climatic factors present within their natural environment e.g. Blackface sheep which have developed a hardiness required to survive and thrive off very little in high hill and mountainous environments. Therefore, it is important new keepers select a breed of sheep suitable to both their location and desired business output. It is worth doing some research into different breeds and their specific requirements before purchasing if you are unsure.

Typically, the following areas are home to the sheep breeds/systems shown below: -

Hill Farms – In these areas, hardy pure-bred sheep are generally farmed e.g. Blackface or Swaledale. The majority of income on these farms is sourced through the sale of surplus ewe lambs as breeding stock or weather lambs as stores.

Upland Farms – In upland areas, hill breeds are often found once again. In these scenarios they are often crossed to produce breeds such as Mules and/or Half Breds. The majority of income on these farms is sourced from selling ewe lambs as breeding stock.

Lowland Farms – In lowland areas, crossbred ewes are generally found. Cross ewes are typically tupped using a terminal sire, producing a well fleshed lamb which can be easily finished.

You may also choose to run a pedigree flock. Pedigree flocks differ from commercial ones in that all sheep are purebred and are typically registered with their individual breed society. Running a pedigree flock can provide opportunities to sell breeding stock to other breeders - generally at premium prices. Pedigree sheep also open up a world of opportunities within the show ring, allowing keepers to compete against other breeders within their chosen breed.



Breeding Techniques

There are several breeding techniques which can be used within sheep flocks. The three main examples are Natural Service (NS), Artificial Insemination (AI) and Embryo Transfer. Natural service remains the most commonly used method within commercial breeding flocks, however, AI and Embryo Transfer are very popular within the pedigree industry. A brief description of each has been provided below: -

Natural Service - The reproductive cycle of a ewe lasts approximately 17 days, with oestrus occurring for 2-3 days within this period. Typically, the average ewe to tup ratio in Lowland flocks is around 40:1. In large flocks these numbers may be significantly higher (around 80:1). Often when these ratios are increased, multiple sire mating groups are introduced e.g. 3 tups run with 300 ewes.

Artificial Insemination (AI) - AI can potentially improve lamb quality by using semen from tups with high genetic merit or desirable characteristics. It can also help create a tight lambing period. There are two different methods of insemination – cervical and laparoscopic. Both processes must be carried out by a trained professional. Due to the financial cost and labour involved within this process, this is generally only carried out in pedigree flocks or very small flocks who cannot justify purchasing a tup.

Embryo Transfer (ET) - Embryo Transfer (ET) is a process which involves flushing (removing) fertilised embryos from a donor ewe and implanting them within a recipient ewe. This effectively establishes a surrogate pregnancy. This is generally carried out using the flocks best breeding ewes as donors. This can considerably speed up the process of genetic improvement within a flock and effectively allows high performing animals to produce far more progeny in their lifetime than they could otherwise manage naturally. This process is typically only carried out using pedigree animals due to the financial cost involved.

Tup MOT

In the case of flocks using natural service, tups play a vital role. It is recommended that all flock owners conduct a quick “Tup MOT” on all new and current stock tups prior to the breeding season (6-8 weeks). This is crucial in helping to ensure tups are fit, fertile and ready for work. There are four key areas which should be assessed within this MOT:

Teeth – Generally, broken or loose teeth will cause discomfort and pain when the animal attempts to eat, which in turn reduces feed intake. This can result in tups losing condition, meaning they may struggle to perform as required.

Feet – Lameness in tups can affect their ability to jump ewes. All tups should have their feet checked for signs of damage or infection, with treatment provided if necessary. Regular footbathing can help to minimise the incidence of foot problems within a flock.

Testicles – Tups should have their testicles assessed to help identify any abnormalities. Care should be taken to ensure that any veterinary treatments required are administered at least ten weeks prior to tupping to help ensure they have no adverse effects on semen production/quality.

Condition – Ideally tups should go into the breeding season with a Body Condition Score (BCS) of 3.5-4.0. The importance of this can be emphasised by the fact that up to 15% of bodyweight can be lost over a six-week tupping period. Significant loss of condition will lead reductions in performance.

Body Condition Scoring

Routine Body Condition Scoring of your flock can help to improve both performance and output. By ensuring ewes are in optimum condition both the fertility and general health of your flock can be improved. Optimum condition scores vary dependant on breed, farm type and the time of year.

Condition scoring is a quick and easy process which can be carried out whenever ewes are in the handling pens. Using your hand, you should feel over/around the backbone and loin of the animal. Ensure you handle the animal behind the last rib to assess general fat cover and muscle mass. Feel for any sharpness of the spine, which may indicate a lean animal. As a rule of thumb, the same hand should be used score all animals – helping to minimise any variability which may occur if using two hands.

Animals should be scored on a scale of one to five, with one being very thin and five being very fat. Quarter and half scores can also be used. For more information on condition scoring, please see the following fact sheet

<https://www.fas.scot/downloads/tn702-body-condition-scoring-mature-sheep/>

Flock Health Plan

It is widely recommended that all sheep keepers implement a flock health plan, which can be used to ensure animals are treated in a timely manner using suitable products. It is worthwhile consulting a local vet for assistance with this task, who will be able to tailor a health plan specific to you flocks needs. Health plans are also a requirement of several assurance schemes such as Quality Meat Scotland (QMS) Farm Assured.

All treatments provided should be recorded within your medicine records and made available for inspection if requested. As a general rule of thumb, health plans should be reviewed with your vet annually and adjusted if required.

Remember – A healthy flock is a happy flock!

Feed, Forage and Fodder

Grass is undoubtedly the cheapest and most important feed used across UK sheep farms. Good quality grass is capable of containing high energy contents of up to 11.5ME and protein contents of 17% - rivalling any top-quality silage.

During periods of adverse weather (or in the case of housed sheep or when grass is scarce), supplementary feed or forage may need to be provided. In terms of forage, this will generally be in the form of silage or hay. Care should be taken to ensure this forage is of a good quality with no mould or contamination which may result in infections such as listeriosis. Having forage analysed can provide an overview of its nutritional value, helping to determine the animal's requirement for any concentrate to be fed in conjunction.

Concentrate feed is typically fed in the lead up to and post lambing when ewes reach their peak production demands in terms of both energy and protein. The level of concentrate feed required varies widely dependant on forage quality, ewe condition, breed and the number of lambs she has to rear. If you have any queries seek advice from a livestock nutritionist who will be able to tailor make a ration specific to your flock's requirements.

In the case of outwintered ewes or finishing lambs, forage crops may provide a cost-effective method of supplying supplementary feed. These crops do not necessarily fit into every system and should typically be grown in free-draining soils for best results. Strip grazing forage crops is recommended to ensure the crop is fully utilised.

Water is another key factor when rationing ewes. Intake levels vary greatly in accordance with both the moisture content of feed provided and the animals production demands. Sheep should always have access to clean, fresh water both when housed and in the field.

Sheep require minerals and trace elements to carry out daily bodily functions. For more information see <https://www.fas.scot/downloads/a-guide-to-trace-elements/>.



Housing and Handling

The requirement to house sheep varies greatly from farm to farm. It is dependent on factors such as the weather, breed of sheep, type of farm and housing availability.

It is important that ewes are housed well in advance of lambing to allow time to adjust and minimise any stress caused to the animals as a result. It is important that ewes are given adequate space when housed to allow them to exhibit normal behaviours. Typically, an in-lamb ewe weighing between 60-90kg will require 1.2-1.4m², with lighter ewes (45-60kg) requiring slightly less space at 1.0-1.30m². This spatial requirement can be reduced if ewes are shorn prior to housing.

Good handling systems also help to make the management of sheep easier, whilst reducing the requirement for additional labour and minimising stress caused to animals during handling. Ensure systems flow – well-designed systems generally exploit the natural movements of sheep, helping them to move willingly throughout the system.



The Three “R’s” - Rules, Regulations and Record Keeping

As a sheep keeper, you are required to adhere to several rules and regulations. These vary throughout the UK and so it is important to ensure that you manage your flock in accordance with the country you farm in.

Prior to keeping sheep all prospective livestock keepers should apply for a County Parish Holding (CPH) number for the land where these animals will be kept. In Scotland, CPH numbers are issued by the Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate (SGRPID). Your flock must also be registered with the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA), who will provide you with a unique six-digit flock number which is linked to your holding (CPH number).

The Holding Register

It is important that all flock owners keep a holding register. This document is essentially a register of the animals kept on your holding. This register should be used to record information about your stock (tag replacements, purchases, sales, deaths etc.), the holding and any movements which may take place.

Movement Documents

Movement documents play a crucial role in creating a high degree of traceability within the livestock sector. All movements from Scottish holdings must be accompanied by a movement document (with the exception of animals who require urgent veterinary treatment).

It is important to remember that moving animals onto your holding will trigger a 13-day standstill period. This standstill period forms part of the Disease Control (Scotland) Order 2002.

Sheep Inspections

Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspections Division (SGRPID) are responsible for carrying out sheep inspections. On an annual basis, they must inspect 3% of registered holdings and 5% of sheep kept within Scotland. The purpose of these inspections is to ensure that flock owners are fully compliant with both animal identification and record keeping.

Sheep Identification

All sheep require an eartag, which allows them to be both identifiable and traced. From the 31st December 2009, any animals born on the holding and intended for breeding (or to be kept till more than 12 months of age) must be fitted with two eartags. Of these two eartags, one must be electronic and the other conventional.

For more information on starting an agricultural business and relevant rules and regulations, please see the following factsheet <https://www.fas.scot/downloads/starting-agricultural-business-2/>.

General Considerations

QMS Farm Assurance – QMS's Farm Assurance Scheme for cattle and sheep is longest established scheme of its kind in the world - having operated for 30 years as of 2020. This is a voluntary scheme which requires producers to adhere to strict welfare and production standards. As a result, any livestock produced on these farms can be sold under the globally recognised "Scotch Lamb" label for a premium price.



Fallen Stock Scheme – The National Fallen Stock Scheme is a not for profit organization who specialise in the collection and disposal of fallen stock. They should be contacted immediately following the death of an animal. Fallen stock companies can also be contacted to destroy injured or critically ill animals. Membership is free to all farmers.

Premium Sheep and Goat Health Scheme (PSGHS) – The PSGHS is owned and operated by the Scottish Agricultural College (SAC) and works in partnership with vets nationwide. The majority of work undertaken through this scheme is testing for Maedi Visna (MV) in pedigree sheep. Testing for Enzootic Abortion of Ewes (EAE) and Johnes Disease can also be carried out.

Codes of Practice for the Welfare of Sheep – It is recommended that all flock owners (both new and experienced) familiarise themselves with the government's welfare guides in relation to the wellbeing of their animals. These guidelines can be found at <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2012/04/code-practice-welfare-sheep/documents/00391621-pdf/00391621-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/00391621.pdf> and should be adhered to at all times.

Key Points

- **Ensure both your holding and flock are registered with the relevant authorities**
- **Familiarise yourself with the relevant record keeping that is associated with keeping sheep**
- **Consider which breed and system will work best for your farm**
- **Familiarise yourself with the basics of both flock health and nutrition**
- **Ensure biosecurity measures are put in place – do not risk the health of your livestock**
- **If you have any queries or concerns seek advice from your local agricultural consultant, vet or nutritionist**